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Mail-snoop suit names CIA chiefs

Providence, R. I. (AP) —Thirty present and former officials of the Central Intelligence Agency and other government agencies yesterday were accused in a class-action suit of illegally opening the mail of Americans.

The suit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union in United States District Court here alleges that officials of the CIA, the FBI and the U.S. Post Office opened the first-class mail of plaintiff Rodney Driver and other Americans.

Mr. Driver, a University of Rhode Island mathematics professor, said three letters he sent to mathematicians in the Soviet Union were opened and copied. He said the letters contained personal and mathematical information.

At a news conference, Mr. Driver said he believed the CIA opened his mail because he obtained copies of the letters from the CIA when he requested them under the Freedom of Information Act.

The Rockefeller commission, which investigated CIA activities, reported in June that the agency opened mail sent to or by American citizens. The mail project began in New York in 1952, the commission said, involving mail to and from the Soviet Union.

The program ended in 1973 and the commission reported that during the last full year of the program the CIA handled 4,350,000 items, examined the outside of 2.3 million, photographed the outside of 33,000 and opened 8,700.

The suit asks the court to order compensatory damages of $20,000 for each letter opened and read by the CIA and punitive damages of $100,000 for each person whose mail was opened by the CIA.

Among those named in the suit are: two former CIA directors, Richard M. Helms and James R. Schlesinger; former acting FBI director, L. Patrick Gray 3d; former U.S. attorney general, John N. Mitchell, and former U.S. Post Office officials Lawrence F. O'Brien and Winton M. Blount.

Also named were the current director of central intelligence, William E. Colby, and the current FBI director, Clarence M. Kelley, whom the ACLU said were named in the suit because they are the officials presently responsible for maintaining the information obtained from the alleged illegal actions.

ACLU officials charged that these and other officials knew of and approved the illegal opening of mail and that they engaged in a conspiracy to cover up the violations.

The ACLU further asks the court to order records obtained through the opening of mail to be destroyed.

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